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City hopes to win back FFA

Convention left for Indianapolis

By Sheldon S. Shafer
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The Courier-Journal

Louisville is trying to get the National FFA Organization to give the city another whirl as the home of its annual meeting.

After holding the convention for seven years, the city lost it to Indianapolis, mostly because Louisville did not have enough hotel rooms, the FFA said when it decided in 2002 to move to Indianapolis.



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The teenagers who attend, wearing dark blue corduroy jackets with FFA emblems on them, pump as much as \$30 million into the economy of the city where they meet during most of a week in late October, according to the Greater Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau.

In Louisville, some people attending the Louisville convention were staying in motels and hotels as far away as Elizabethtown and Shelbyville.

But Jefferson County now has about 2,000 more rooms than it had in 2002.

The convention drew nearly 60,000 young people interested in careers in agribusiness to Indianapolis in 2006.

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Brett Hatfield, an FFA member and a senior at Oldham County High School, has attended two FFA conventions in Louisville and one, last October, in Indianapolis. He said he prefers Louisville, mainly because "everything is all connected and together (at the Kentucky Exposition Center) and parking is better."

The FFA, formerly the Future Farmers of America, is committed to the Hoosier capital through 2012, but its board will decide in October 2008 where it will convene for at least seven years and possibly 10 years, starting in 2013.

Fourteen cities have indicated they plan to make proposals by Friday for serving as the FFA host city.

"We've got a chance," said Jim Wood, president of the Greater Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau, which is assembling the bid. Wood said he plans to drive to Indianapolis with Louisville's offer on Friday.

He said he believes the FFA would like to stay in the Midwest, where many of its members live, and that the chief competition may come from Indianapolis; Columbus, Ohio; Nashville, Tenn.; and St. Louis.

Linda Edwards, vice president of sales and marketing for the Kentucky State Fair Board, said she believes Louisville has at least a 50-50 chance of landing the convention.

The FFA will probably narrow the sites to four or five in November, then have a delegation visit those cities. The organization plans to name two or three finalists next spring. The board will then select a site at the convention in 2008, FFA spokeswoman Julie Adams said.

FFA headquarters are in Indianapolis, but Adams said that will not affect a decision on the convention's location.

She said many members are "happy with the convention in Indianapolis," but that a lot of people were also happy with the convention in Louisville.

Adams said the availability of affordable hotel rooms probably is the most important consideration in deciding where to hold the convention. The availability of top convention facilities also is high on the list.

Other factors include low-cost transportation between hotels and the convention site, things to do after-hours, volunteer assistance, a "safe environment" for the convention and a variety of incentives

Wood said the proposal requires:

Up to 16,000 hotel rooms within a 40-mile radius.

Wood said Jefferson County now has about 15,000 rooms, with several thousand more available in Southern Indiana and nearby Kentucky counties. That doesn't include three or four major hotels expected to open downtown and another 500-room hotel planned at the Expo Center, all by around 2010.

The 615-room downtown Marriott has opened since the FFA decided to leave Louisville, as have numerous smaller properties. From a hotel-room standpoint, "Louisville is in a better position now," Adams said.

The city must provide at least \$1 million to defray FFA costs, either through in-

kind services, corporate underwriting or in a write-down of the cost of the FFA to rent convention facilities.

The city must provide 1,500 to 3,000 volunteers to help with logistics such as transporting the students.

Wood said the city will propose that convention entertainment be at the planned downtown arena. And another venue -- a large amphitheater, replacing Cardinal Stadium -- should be open at the Expo Center by 2011.

Louisville's attractions, including the planned Museum Plaza, the arena, the Muhammad Ali Center, the Slugger Museum, 4th Street Live and other sites of interest to the high schoolers also may be persuasive, officials said.

But the biggest advantage for Louisville may be the recent improvements at the Expo Center, Edwards said. That includes the newly expanded South Wing and the new North Wing under construction to replace the outmoded East Wing

"Our facility is safe and self-contained," meaning that nearly all the convention activity can take place at the Expo Center, Edwards noted.

With controlled access, including ample on-site parking, the Expo Center "is high up, on the safety end," Adams said.

Other cities invited to vie for the convention are Anaheim, Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Kansas City, Las Vegas, Minneapolis and Orlando.

Reporter Sheldon S. Shafer can be reached at (502) 582-7089.



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